Coaldale

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Coaldale challenges CRHA decision

–Photo by Colleen Valin

Coaldale residents Les Handley and Dave Dyck challenge Chinook Regional Health Authority member Bruce Milliken, left, during a public forum Tuesday.

■ By COLLEEN VALIN

The Chinook Regional Health Authority's decision to replace Coaldale's acute care hospital with an emergency ward is leaving a sour taste in residents' mouths.

Mayor Alex Hann said the authority's move to allow emergency services to remain at the Coaldale Health Care Centre is a relief, "but it isn't good enough."

Hann said following a private meeting between the town, the hospital board and CRHA members late Wednesday afternoon he was of the understanding the authority was prepared to disclose the data which supported its decision to close the Coaldale facility, and allow for the local board to develop options.

"My assumption is they would table the closure proposal for a few weeks to allow us to prepare alternatives," stated Hann, a move that didn't happen.

Thursday the health authority voted in favor of closing the primary care portion of the Coaldale facility in favor of long-term care beds. Similar decisions were made for Picture Butte and Magrath.

Public outcry in the form of nearly 700 residents attending a public forum in Coaldale last Tuesday opposing the closure and 920 letters from Magrath residents prompted the CRHA to reconsider its plan to do away with acute emergency care in those communities. Three swing beds in each emergency ward will allow for assessment of patients and the staging of treatment. The maximum stay will be 24 hours.

"The authority has given us no specifics as to what they mean by what they've appeared to have given us," said Hann, who considers the move a CRHA-based decision which sidestepped consultation with local officials.

Frustrated with the authority's refusal to consider Coaldale's proximity to Lethbridge Regional Hospital as an advantage rather than a negative, Hann said if the CRHA would open their eyes they could see an active treatment centre in Coaldale that would take the stress off city departments already stretched to the maximum.

"This authority seems to forget the highway to Lethbridge goes both ways," stated the mayor. "We'll need to stress that we can be an advantage to be here and be active."

Coaldale hospital administrator Bob Petreshewski said the board is not as disappointed as it originally was regarding the closure as the private meeting shows consultation has begun.

"It's important for people to know there has now been some movement by the health authority which indicates they want to work co-operatively with us," he said, explaining the CRHA is allowing them to review statistics and come back with a proposal.

Petreshewski said the health authority has now shared some of the rationale behind its decision for closure, "which we didn't agree with, but we now know where they are coming from."

He is hopeful with the consultation process under way both organizations can go forward and work for what is best for the entire health region.

Hospital board chairman Leonard Fast is also hopeful Coaldale will be allowed to develop a proposal which addresses the community's concerns.

"The position paper adopted Thursday is not etched in stone," said Fast. "There must be movement on their part."

He added the board is appreciative of the movement made by the health authority and is hopeful "a solution satisfactory to our community and to the CRHA can be reached."

It could however take lots of movement on the part of the health authority if the angry crowd of residents who packed the R.I. Baker School auditorium for Tuesday's Save Our Hospital public hearing is any indication. Loud applause vibrated through the auditorium as young and old questioned the logic of the CRHA's strategic plan and demanded the continuance of the hospital.

Loud boos and jeers greeted Coaldale's representative to the health authority, John Voorhorst, who toed the party line on the issue of closure.

"Closing of acute care beds doesn't make anyone on the regional health authority happy," read Voorhorst from a prepared statement as he assured residents their needs had been considered by the authority in reaching its decision.

Voorhorst also received a negative reaction from the audience when he declined to answer a question regarding his position on the proposal.

"This is only a recommendation. No one has taken a vote yet," he said, noting the vote would be taken two days later.

During Thursday's vote to begin restructuring of health care services in the region, Voorhorst supported the recommendation to close Coaldale's acute care services.

Casson satisfied with change

The salvaging of Picture Butte's hospital emergency ward has left town Mayor Rick Casson quite satisfied with the Chinook Regional Health Authority's restructuring plan.

"This is more than what we had hoped for," he said, believing the board's decision to leave the emergency ward, three swing beds and diagnostic services is good.

"With long-term care, three swing beds and an emergency department we are in good shape," he commented.

Last week Casson had expressed concern with the authority's decision to cut acute care service from the Picture Butte Hospital. He said he was disturbed about the lack of communication between the town and the regional authority.

Coun. Elton Anderson, who will lose his job as hospital administrator April 1, said last week the town may be able to ward off further cuts by voicing its opposition to the CRHA's plans.

Casson had planned to approach the outgoing hospital board, the local chamber of commerce and the town's economic development committee about sending a letter of protest to the CRHA.

"We realize the CRHA can't say transitional enough," he later said, explaining changes will come yearly.

MLA's Picture Butte meeting poorly attended

■ By STEPHEN RIPLEY

Little Bow MLA Barry McFarland was ready to hear from his constituents in Picture Butte last Friday, but apparently they weren't ready to hear from him as fewer than than 10 people showed up for an advertised question-and-answer session.

"I guess this means people in Picture Butte don't have too many complaints," said McFarland with a chuckle.

Those who made the trip to the town office were particularly interested in the provincial government's efforts to cut the deficit by regionalizing the education and health care systems. Some said they thought the government had gone too far but McFarland insisted drastic change was needed to improve efficiency.

"We can't afford to keep the status quo," he said, stressing the need to cut administrative fat while keeping the muscle in both systems.

"Administrators don't teach kids and administrators don't look after people in the hospitals."

While the recently-announced plans of the Chinook Regional Health Authority may come as a shock to area residents, McFarland said they were the best way to shake up the system. If hospitals were given more time to consult with each other about streamlining services, he said they would be at each other's throats, unable to decide which programs should be cut.

McFarland said Picture Butte Municipal Hospital remained relatively unscathed because its board had prepared itself for regionalization, opting to change its focus to long-term care.

"Even before regionalization they've been continually doing things differently," he noted.

McFarland said this wasn't the case with the Coaldale Health Care Centre, which was unprepared for change and unwilling to accept its new status as a long-term facility.

"It's not a closure," he emphasized. "They are changing the way it will be used."

Another hot topic of discussion was McFarland's private member's bill to raise the provincial drinking age to 19. Although he wasn't sure how it would fare in the legislature, McFarland said it deserved to be debated, considering the support it had received from parents, school boards, doctors and the Insurance Bureau of Canada.

"I think being able to drink is a privilege," he said. "I'm less concerned about the mature 18-year-old than I am about the susceptible 15-year-old."

McFarland said he wanted to eliminate the threat posed by 18-year-olds still in high school. He said they often use peer pressure to get younger friends to drink, which can have disastrous consequences.

"When you look at the statistics, 30 to 40 per cent of 18-year-olds will admit they have become habitual users of alcohol or soft drugs," he explained. "Half of those use alcohol."

McFarland said Alberta should join the majority of provinces, including neighbors Saskatchewan and Manitoba, in making 19 the legal drinking age. He said this would eliminate the dangerous practice of teens driving into Alberta for a drink.

"Why aren't we consistent?" he asked.

McFarland also held town hall meetings in Turin and Iron Springs last Friday, and is scheduled to do the same in Coalhurst, Nobleford, Barons, Monarch and Carmangay this week.

–Photo by Stephen Ripley

Little Bow MLA Barry McFarland talks politics with Roelof Scholten in the Picture Butte town office last Friday. McFarland also held town hall meetings in Turn and Irons Springs last week.